what it's all about . . .

Jesus commissioned his followers in the areas of witness and outreach - community and discipleship - faith, worship and baptism - doctrinal identity

the Gospel Commission

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Farewell speeches can change the world. The patriarch Jacob's farewell speech, along with that of Moses, fixed the very character and nature of the Hebrew people and established them in the land of Israel, which they continue to occupy today, three thousand five hundred years later. Those two farewell speeches give a preview of uncanny accuracy, a sort of advance glance into the heart and soul of an entire people, who have exerted a major influence on society during their entire history.

In a similar manner Jesus placed his stamp on the nature and shape of the Christian church through his farewell speech, commissioning and shaping his followers for a still ongoing challenge. He defined the core task of the infant church, and its response has ever since determined its life and structure.

Jesus' speech to his disciples echoes those of Jacob and Moses. His twelve disciples take the place of the twelve sons who heard Jacob's speech, and the twelve tribes, assembled to hear the farewell speech of Moses. There are differences between Jesus and Jacob or Moses, however. While these ancient Hebrew leaders would soon be removed from their people by their death, Jesus would live on in an exalted new position from which he would continue to impact his followers.

In Matthew 28:16-20 Jesus paraphrases Daniel's report of a vision of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man in Daniel chapter 7, replacing "Son of Man" with a reference to himself: "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to *me*." Jesus follows this with the punch line of his farewell speech: "go…and make disciples of all people groups." The resurrected Jesus then promised something not found in other farewell speeches—his continued presence: "I am with you always, right to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

As Jesus issued this striking order, his disciples looked back on their own discipling, more than three years of learning and sharing. However, their sharing of their discoveries had been restricted to a single people group, fellow Jews (Matthew 10:12). Jesus now challenges them to do what He earlier only hinted at: they were to go out of their way, approach people regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or faith, and challenge them to become his followers.

In Mark 16:15 Jesus commissions his disciples to "proclaim the good news of the gospel to every creature", echoing the words of Isa 61:1-3.

Luke placed Jesus' commission in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, providing crucial insight into the role of the Holy Spirit in the church. "In a few days you will be baptised in Holy Spirit…and you will receive power…" Acts 1:5-8. Jesus then commands "be my witnesses", echoing God's assertion through the prophet Isaiah that his people constantly witness about Him. See especially Isa 43:10, where the content of "witness" includes "to know me, to put your trust in me, and to understand that I am the Lord." Just as ancient Israel was to be God's witness to the nations, so Jesus' disciples would be witnesses first in Jerusalem, then to the entire world, Acts 1:8.

In John's Gospel, Jesus directs his farewell speech to Peter, employing images of shepherds and grapevines to express the commission, asking Peter three times to feed and shepherd his sheep (21:15-17). By these words Jesus calls for churches to care for their members while also proclaiming the Gospel to those who do not yet believe. In John's account of the Last Supper, Jesus weaves His gospel commission into vineyard imagery, comparing his disciples to grape-bearing branches. He twice states "I am the vine" (15:1, 5) and twice instructs, "produce fruit which glorifies the Father" (verses 8 and 16). Jesus then sends his disciples to the world, echoing the command used in Matthew and Mark, and implied in Acts: "go out and produce fruit which remains" (verse 16).

All four Gospels stress that Jesus' followers are to take the life of God, which they experience in the church, to the world. All are to share the good news that through the Holy Spirit Jesus, the living Lord of both church and world, meets and joins with his followers in the church. The life that God intended is already available here and now, and as long as time lasts: "I will be with you always, to the end of time" (Matt 28:20). ■

For reflection . . .

- Why do you think Jesus and other Bible characters issued important messages like this gospel commission in farewells? What does this strategy tell you about these messages?
- The commission included instruction to make disciples by baptising, teaching and witnessing. How do these elements relate to each other and to our personal faith?
- What do you think of Isaiah's view of what it meant to witness? See Isaiah 43:10.